

The guns and gear of Single Action Shooting

by National Discipline Chairman Damion Faith

Grab a couple of single-action revolvers, a shotgun and a lever-action rifle, add to that a gun belt and holsters and we are ready for Single Action Shooting, right? Well, no, not really. The term 'guns' and 'gear' when applied to Single Action Shooting is much more expansive a subject than with most other shooting disciplines. It may be said that this is one reason why Single Action Shooting does not appeal to everyone. What can be said is that Single Action shooters usually have some sphere of interest in the Old West, whether it be the firearms of that long-ago era, the clothing or the general way of life as it was on the frontiers and in the fledgling towns of America and Australia back in the 1800s.

Perhaps a good place to start is with the firearms commonly used in Single Action competition and just how to choose what is right for you. Not so many years ago a Single Action shooter could gear up with firearms of choice for less than \$2000. Today, however, it is more than double that cost. Mistakes in choice can be costly to say the least. So how do we then avoid these pitfalls? It is relatively easy in fact.

Usually, the first exposure to Single Action Shooting is at club level and it is here that you will learn the protocols and safety procedures of the competition itself. It is also here that you will be able to try firearms used by other Single Action shooters at the club. This is how to minimise the risk of purchasing the wrong firearms. Nearly all Single Action shooters will let you try their equipment at club level and share their knowledge of the competition. These two pieces of information in themselves allow you to make an informed decision as to what category you prefer to compete in and then the decision of which firearms to purchase becomes much easier.

For example, let us assume you wish to compete in the Traditional category, which is where most shooters start out. You will then perhaps prefer a pair of



Period-correct hat, pocket-watch and men's tie.

Ruger Vaquero single-action revolvers, in a choice of calibres from .32 to .45 Long Colt, a lever-action rifle model 1894 Marlin Cowboy and a double-barrel, pump-action or lever-action shotgun chambered for 12-gauge. A choice of firearms such as this would allow participation in various categories without being compelled to purchase additional firearms.

This is not to say, however, that as a Single Action shooter you may not wish to purchase additional combinations at a later stage to participate in more specific categories that require other specific firearms to be used. Such an example would be the Classic Cowboy category, which requires the use of double-barrel or lever-action shotguns with external hammers and single-action revolvers and rifles chambered for the .40-calibre rimmed cartridge or larger. Rifles must be model 1873 or earlier models or their modern reproductions. It is quite usual

for Single Action shooters to purchase various combinations of firearms and switch categories at above club level competitions.

So far we have addressed firearms which would predominately be used with smokeless ammunition; we have not even considered the black powder firearms and categories yet. Although black powder cartridges may be used if shooting in the Frontier Cartridge category, in the firearms described it is not unusual for a Single Action shooter to maintain a set of firearms especially for use in the black powder categories. Percussion or cap and ball revolvers require an entirely different set of skills and knowledge to ensure that they can be used reliably throughout competition. Allowable calibres range from .36 to .45.

Having settled on a choice of firearms then comes the selection of gun leather suitable to safely and comfortably carry the revolvers during competition. Addi-

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Top-quality gun leather.

tionally, there are other items required for competition. Ammunition belts, loading strips, bandoleers and ammunition pouches come in various configurations, which, in the end, become the choice of the individual competitor. It must be noted, however, that there are restrictions on certain configurations and these restrictions are contained in the rules.

Let us start by looking at what holsters and belts are most commonly used by Single Action shooters. There are drop-loop holsters, buscadero holsters, cross-draw holsters, flap or military-style holsters, holsters with hammer thongs and leg tie-downs and the list goes on. One point worth mentioning here is that whatever holster you choose, it must be able to safely retain the revolver throughout what can be considered as a normal range of movement. Additionally, holsters, when worn, may not depart from the vertical angle by more than 30 degrees.

Perhaps the most popular holster and belt configuration favoured by Single Action shooters today is the double butt to the rear gun rig. This means that both the left-hand and right-hand revolvers are retained with their butts facing rearward, as opposed to the cross-draw rig, where



Loading strip and custom cartridge belt.

one holster retains the revolver with the butt to the rear and the other with the butt facing forward.

Whatever choice you make it is always advisable to seek out a competent gun leather maker who is familiar with Single Action requirements. There are a number of excellent gun leather makers in Australia who cover all price ranges. It can be expected that a durable and functional gun rig will cost the Single Action shooter anywhere from \$250 and upwards, with the more substantial, carved and decorated rigs being in the upper price ranges

of many hundreds of dollars. However, a careful selection will ensure many years of good service from a quality set of holsters and belt.

Occasionally, secondhand gun leather is available from other Single Action shooters who may have upgraded their equipment. Significant cost savings can be experienced by purchasing secondhand gun leather when starting out in Single Action competition and many new shooters take advantage of such offerings when available.

The other important leather item required is the cartridge belt, bandoleer or pouch. Here again, the range of choice is considerable. The most popular cartridge belt choice may be the single belt with loops for shotgun ammunition and calibre-specific rifle and pistol ammunition. The number of loops is, once again, the personal choice of the owner. As a guide, however, it is usual to have up to 12 shotgun loops and up to 10 calibre-specific loops on the belt, so sufficient ammunition can be carried for the shotgun and any rifle or pistol reloads during a course of fire.

Another recent innovation is the loading strip or loading block. These are also many and varied in style. The leather calibre-specific loading strip with provision for 10 rounds on either side of the strip is possibly the most popular configuration. This strip may or may not clip on to the gun belt, but nevertheless will allow the competitor to take to the loading table the required number of rounds for the revolvers and rifles for any given stage. The average cost for a loading strip is around \$35.

We have now procured our firearms and our gun leather and we are almost ready to start out on the competition circuit. But what of our clothing? What should we wear? Now this is not all that difficult really. Some Single Action shooters opt for the Akubra hat, jeans, RM Williams boots and a bandana and this is a fine choice. Others, however, choose more period-style clothing, including Stetson hats, frock coats, chaps (pro-

SSAA COMPETITION - THE DISCIPLINES ISSUE

nounced 'shapps'), vests, stovepipe boots, suspenders/braces and puff ties for the male shooters to better portray their persona.

Many ladies are extremely particular when it comes to authenticity in their period dress and many go to great lengths to assemble their outfits from scratch, procuring period patterns and period-correct materials much as they would have done in that long-ago era.

For those without the necessary skills to manufacture their period clothing there are still other avenues available. Seamstresses and tailors are available in Australia within the Single Action fraternity and while there are only a few, these skilled persons will manufacture period clothing for the individual at very reasonable prices.

Another option available to assemble a period outfit is to scour the op shops where suitable clothing for both male and female shooters can be procured at amazingly low prices. A little alteration and imagination and there you have it - a new 1880s outfit for the most discerning gentleman or lady of the era.

Whatever the choice and available



An S&W Model No. 3 revolver with 8" barrel, top, two Ruger Vaqueros in .38-calibre and .345-calibre, and a cap and ball Colt revolver in .44-calibre.

finances, there is a broad scope of options available to assemble a period outfit to do the wearer proud at any Single Action match or social gathering.

Guns, gun leather and clothing to hand, we are now ready to start down the trail

for our first Single Action shooting event, so let's move out and enjoy the competition and company of those thousands of Single Action shooters across the globe who keep the romantic era of the Old West alive and well. ●

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